

**33 A Last Survivor of the Crimean War?:
 Colour-Sergeant James Gray, (Royal Marine Artillery)
 by Dr Douglas J Austin 33 [TWC 29(1) p6 2011]**

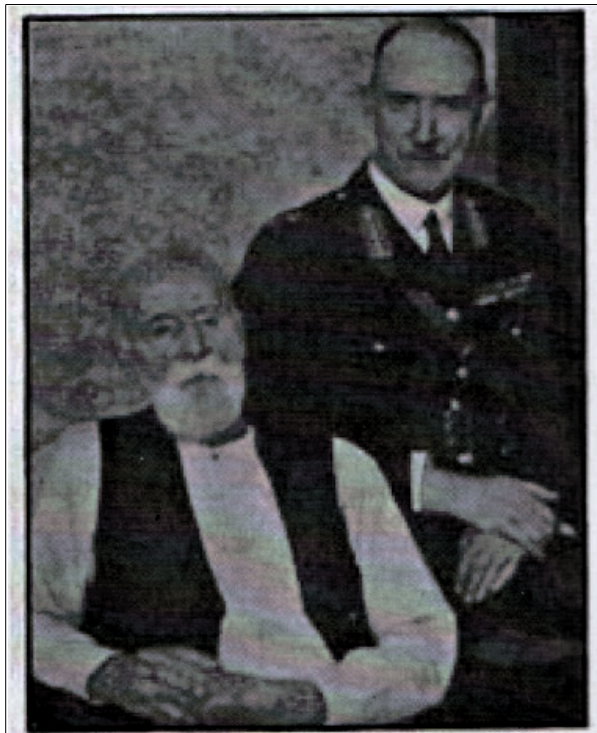
Further to the proof (by Tom Muir and myself) that Rookes Evelyn Bell Crompton (1845-1940) falsely claimed entitlement to the British Crimea Medal¹, I have searched for a more worthy candidate for the title of *'Last Survivor'*. Here I present evidence that Colour Sergeant James Gray of the Royal Marine Artillery may have been just that man. His name occurred in a letter to *'The Times'* for 12th January, 1938 written by Mr. A. J. Waterfield of 60, Beaumont Road, Worthing, who was a long-term *'collector'* of Crimea and Indian Mutiny veterans. He then wrote *"The oldest of the surviving veterans is a centenarian. This is ex-Colour Sergeant James Gray, of Southsea, who joined the Royal Marines 84 years ago and was out in the Crimea"*. He corrected himself in his final letter to *'The Times'*, dated 11th January, 1940, in which he stated *"The third veteran to pass away in 1939 was Colour-Sergeant James Gray, of Southsea, at the age of 102. He joined the Royal Marines 85 years ago and served in the Crimean War, going out to the Baltic in HMS 'Hawk' [sic], commanded by Captain Erasmus Ommaney [Ommanney], afterwards Admiral Sir Erasmus Ommaney.² Retiring in 1875, he drew pension 64 years."* The revisions indicate that, since 1938, Mr Waterfield had received corrections specifically concerning this man and his service.

I have searched the Crimean and Baltic Medal Rolls and have found:- 1) James Gray, Fireman aboard the *'Oneida'* transport, [p 2715], - Crimea Medal.; 2) 62 James Gray, Quarter Master aboard HMS *'Wasp'*, [p 3180], - Crimea Medal.; 3) 61 James Gray, Private RM aboard HMS *'Arrogant'* [p 552]. - Baltic Medal sent to Hd. Qrs. Chatham 18/3/57.; 4) 13 James Gray, Private aboard HMS *'Hawke'*, commanded by Ommanney. [p 586].- Baltic Medal sent to Hd. Qrs. Gospt. 4/4/57. No. 4 certainly corresponds with Mr Waterfield's letter dated in 1940 but his Attestation Papers of Service in the Royal Marines have apparently not survived in the National Archives (ADM 157).

HMS *'Hawke'* was launched as a 3rd-rate sailing ship on 16th March, 1820 at Woolwich Dockyard.³ For the Crimean period, she was first mentioned in *'The Times'* on 7 October, 1854 in a report which reads:- *"The Russell...is to be docked, and converted into a screw line of battle ship, to carry heavy metal on both her decks; her poop is to be cut down, and her false keel to be taken off, in order to ease her draught of water. She is ordered to have her machinery in, and to be in every respect ready for sea by the 3d March next. The Hawke, 72 guns, built at Woolwich in 1820, of 1,754 tons, on reduced lines of Christian VII⁴, is ordered to be sent up from Sheerness to Chatham yard for a similar purpose in every respect. She is also to be ready for sea by the 3d of March next."* On 17th January, 1855:- *"The 74- gun ships, the Pembroke, the Hawke, the Russell, and the Hastings have been converted into 60-gun screw blockships, and will be taken out of dock the first week in February."* and on 3rd February:- *"Captain Erasmus Ommanney (1846), recently serving in Eurydice, to commission and command the Hawke, 60, screw steamship at Sheerness."* On 17th April:- *"The trial of the machinery of the Hawke, 60 guns, was in every respect satisfactory. Her average speed was 7 5-10th knots."* On 24th April:- *"The Hawke, 60, new screw steamship, Captain Ommanney, arrived at Spithead yesterday afternoon, from Sheerness, to get men and await further orders."* and on 19th May, she was one of five 60-gun blockships at Spithead.

Reports of the short-lived activities of HMS *'Hawke'* in the Baltic began in *'The Times'* for 16th July, 1855:- *"THE BALTIC FLEET DANTSIC, JULY 13 ... The following vessels, which make up the other part of his squadron, remain at Nargen⁵, the Hawke, Pembroke, Hastings, Russell, together with some gunboats and mortar vessels. On 25th July:- Hawke and other ships were anchored off Revel and on 12th September came the report:- "On the 1st of September the Euryalus put into Faro, where were lying the Hawke, Gorgon and Belleisle."* Her most exciting action was

described on 20th September:- "THE BALTIC FLEET....GOTTLAND, SEPT. 10...The flying-squadron in the Gulf of Bothnia, under the command of Rear-Admiral Baynes, is ably performing the services allotted to it, harassing the enemy in every possible manner, penetrating the narrow creeks and channels in that locality, capturing every small craft that ventures afloat, and destroying every place that it can reach. The Hawke, steam block-ship, has made a diversion against the fortifications of Riga, dismantled a few guns of the enemy, and killed and wounded some 15 Russians, who showed some opposition by sending out 15 of their gun-boats, who fired on the Hawke, but without causing any further casualty than lodging a few shot in her hull and wounding one of her men in the arm, which has rendered amputation of the limb necessary ... The Hawke, Captain Ommanney, arrived in Faro Sound on the 1st. inst., where she remained at anchor for a week, and then left to rejoin the main body of the fleet at Nargen." On 16th October: "Orders have been received at Portsmouth to pay wages immediately to the crews of the block-ships Pembroke, Cornwallis, Russell, Hawke, and Hastings. The Hawke went back to Portsmouth harbour yesterday to repair some defects." and on the 23rd October:- "The crew of the Hawke, 60, Captain Ommanney, was turned over to the Belvidere hulk, in Portsmouth harbour, yesterday, and the ship taken alongside the the dockyard for refit." *On 13th November, there was a Court Martial on board HMS 'Victory' of Private George Stevens [sic] of the Royal Marine Corps, belonging to Her Majesty's ship Hawke, but serving on board her gun-boat tender HMS 'Biter'.⁶ Charged with deserting his post, wilful damage of property, drunkenness, theft, and intention to desert, he was found Guilty of all except the last charge and sentenced to 50 lashes and forfeiture of all pay and allowances due to him. [49 Private George Stephens on HMS 'Hawke's crew list was, however, awarded the Baltic Medal (p 1398) while serving n HMS 'Edinburgh' on 20/4/57.] The ship's refit was reported as complete on 1st December and she took part in the reviewe at Portsmouth by the King of Sardinia on the 4th. On 5th March, 1856:- "Her Majesty's ship Hawke, Captain Ommanney, will leave Spithead today, with a party of marines [perhaps including James Gray], for Plymouth. It is reported that she will proceed from Plymouth for the North American station." *She was still in Portsmouth harbour on March. The first reports after the end of the war stated on 2nd May, 1856:-* "The Majestic, 81, Captain Hope, and the Hawke, 60, Captain Ommanney, left the fleet on Wednesday night for the Eastward, the latter to be paid off."and on 5th May:- "Admiralty orders have arrived at Sheerness to dismantle and pay off the officers and crew (except the men entered for continuous services) of the following ships, viz.:- The Hawke, 60 guns, screw steamship, Captain Erasmus Ommanney." *By 8th September, Hawke was reported as part of the steam reserve squadron at Sheemess and on 13th December, Melampus, Eagle and Hawke were commissioned as ships of Coastguard. HMS Hawke was operated as a Coastguard vessel based at Queenstown (Cork) from December, 1856 to March, 1864. She was broken up at Devonport in 1865.**



James Gray c. 1938

James
Gray
may
have



**62, Londesborough Road,
Southsea**

appeared in no less than 9 Censuses! The 7 accessible returns provide good information on him. Thus, in 1851 he was aged 14, born in Bath, Somerset; in 1861, he was aged 25 as a Gunner in the Royal Marine Artillery aboard HMS *'Victor Emanuel'*, born in Whitcombe [Widcombe⁷], Somerset; in 1871 he was aged 34 as a Sergeant in the Royal Marine Artillery; in 1881 he was aged 44 (birthplace not given) as a married Assistant Warden in Parkhurst Prison, IOW. He had with him his wife Charlotte Anne (39, born in Hayling Island), daughters Laura (8, born in Ireland), Minnie Charlotte (5, born in Portsmouth) and Ada Maria (4, born in Chatham) and son Ernest (2, born in Chatham); in 1891 he was aged 54, born in Bath, Somerset, as a Pensioner of the Convict Service with wife Charlotte and children Minnie (15), Ada (14), Ernest (12) and George (8). The corresponding birthplaces match with the 1881 return; in 1901 he was aged 64 as Retired Royal Marines born in Bath Somerset, with wife Charlotte (59) and son Ernest (21). Again, the corresponding birthplaces match with the 1881 return; in 1911 (the latest accessible Census) he was aged 74 in Portsmouth, Hampshire, as a married Naval Pensioner born in Bath in 1837 and accompanied only by his wife Charlotte (aged 69, corresponding birthplace to 1881). They are described as having been married for 39 years and having had 7 children, 5 still living. In that year, they were living at 119, Londesborough Road, Southsea. His wife, who he married in Portsea late in 1871, died in Portsmouth early in 1920, aged 78.

James Gray died in Portsmouth on 7th August, 1939. On 10th August, *"The Times"* reported:- *"DEATH OF OLDEST PENSIONER OF THE ROYAL MARINES. Ex-Colour-Sergeant James Gray, who died yesterday at the age of 102, was the oldest pensioner of the Royal Marines. He had drawn a pension for 64 years. For some years the officers of the Corps had made him a allowance of tobacco."* His death was also noted in the *"Manchester Guardian"* for 10th August:- *"OLDEST MARINE DIES AT 102. The oldest of the Royal Marines, ex-Colour Sergeant James Gray, has died at the age of 102 at his home in Sutherland Road, Southsea, Hampshire. He liked to describe himself as "the King's Bad Bargain" because he had drawn a pension for 64 years. He enlisted in 1854 and served for 21 years. For the last few years he had been visited every birthday by the*

commandant of the Royal Marine Barracks, Eastney, Portsmouth. On his hundredth birthday messages of congratulation were sent by the King as Colonel-in-Chief of the Royal Marines and by the Adjutant General." On 2nd September, "The Children's Newspaper" reported:- "The oldest pensioner of the Royal Marines, Colour-Sergeant James Gray, has passed away at 102; he used to call himself the King's Bad Bargain because he cost the State so much, being pensioned 64 years." In his Will dated 6th February, 1929 (made when he lived at 62 Londesborough Road, Southsea), he left all of his property to his son Ernest Gray of 92 Sutherland Road, Southsea. Probate was granted in the amount of £264 10s. His Death Certificate describes him as a "Pensioned Colour Sergeant Royal Marine Artillery and Pensioned Prison Warder" with the Cause of Death given as "1 (a) Cardiac Failure (b) Senile Myocardial Degeneration." The Informant was his son E. J. Gray, who was present at the death. [The 1911 Census shows Ernest J Gray (born in Chatham in 1879) as a "Skilled Labourer Naval Ordnance" aged 32, married for 4 years to Ada (28) and with two sons James (3) and Frederick (2). His wife and sons were all born in Southsea. In 1911, they lived at 92, Sutherland Road, Southsea, just one street away from his parents.] James Gray was buried, with military honours, in the Milton Cemetery on 11th August, 1939. Perhaps his descendants still live in the Portsmouth area?

Reports in the Hampshire Telegraph successively stated:- ; (15th April, 1927): "Mr James Gray of 119, Londesborough Road, Southsea...He was engaged in several skirmishes in the Gulf of Riga, was present at the storming of Riga itself, and also assisted in the bombardment of Kronstadt...was awarded the Baltic Medal... When he retired from the service in June, 1875, with the rank of colour-sergeant, he was awarded the Meritorious Medal⁸ and for 16 years he was employed as a prison warder at Chatham and Parkhurst. Mr Gray has lived in Portsmouth for the past 36 years."; (8th May, 1936): "James Gray, who lives with his son, Mr. Ernest Gray, at 92, Sutherland Road, Southsea...James Gray was born at Bath on October 9, 1836...commanded by Captain Erasmus Ommany [sic], who was something of a martinet... When the Royal Marine Artillery was formed Mr Gray volunteered to join the corps and was accepted...His last ship was the Assurance, which was a dispatch vessel and went on commission for four years and three months...he prides himself that he has worked for nobody since 1890."; (15th October, 1937): "Mr Gray enlisted in the Royal Marines at Chatham on June 3, 1854 and transferred to the R.M.A. at Eastney on July 2, 1856. He went on pension on July 2, 1875, and describes himself as "The King's bad bargain" ; (11th August, 1939): "...died at the age of 102 at his home at 92, Sutherland Road, Southsea on Monday...All the Commandants at Eastney have visited him during the last few years, and the officers have sent him a quarter of a pound of tobacco every month, which he used to enjoy right to the end...He was by far the oldest Marine pensioner, and the Corps appropriately honoured him when he celebrated his 100th birthday on October 9, 1936. King Edward VIII, as Colonel-in-Chief, sent him a birthday greeting which read, "The King is much interested to hear that you are celebrating your 100th birthday today, and sends you hearty congratulations and good wishes. "...As he would have wished, military honours will be accorded by his beloved corps at the funeral, which will take place at Milton Cemetery at 2 p.m. today."

If Colour-Sergeant James Gray was indeed the last survivor of the Baltic campaign, the questions at once arise, who was the last survivor of the Crimea campaign? Of the Balkan campaign? Of the White Sea campaign? Of the Pacific campaign? Perhaps a reader can offer suggestions?

Acknowledgements:-

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Endnotes:-

1. "The Last Survivor: Crompton's Spurious Medals", Douglas J Austin and Tom Muir, 'The War Correspondent'. 27(3), pp 29-35, October, 2009.
2. "In December 1851, Ommanney was appointed Deputy Controller-General of the Coastguard, and held this post until 1854, when, on the outbreak of the Russian war, he commissioned the "Eurydice" as senior officer of a small squadron for the White Sea, where he blockaded Archangel, stopped the coasting trade, and destroyed government property. His White Sea service culminated in a battle between his squadron and a Russian monastery at Archangel. In 1855 he was appointed to the 'Hawke', blockship for the Baltic, and was employed chiefly as senior officer in the Gulf of Riga, where the service was one of rigid blockade, varied by occasional skirmishes with the Russian gunboats and batteries. Ommanney's period in the Baltic was marked by his aggressive operations against Russian shore positions and gunboats, summoning defenceless towns to surrender, and his exaggerated reports of successes." L. G. C. Laughton, 'Ommanney, Sir Erasmus (1814-1904)', rev. Andrew Lambert, Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, Oxford University Press, 2004.
3. HMS 'Hawke': URL:- <http://www.pdavis.nl/ShowShip.php?id=64>.
4. This three-decker 3rd-rate 80-gun Danish ship of the line was captured at Copenhagen on 7 September 1807. In the book "Old Ship Figure-Heads and Sterns" by L. G. Carr Laughton (Dover Publications, 2001), it is stated (pp 129-130) "The curious and simple Hohlenberg stern of the Christian VII, taken in 1807, is illustrated. Its peculiarities are its extreme narrowness aloft, a reversion seemingly to 17th century fashion, and its very wide open quarter galleries reaching to the stern. This ship was very highly thought of and her lines were copied in England. One at least of the ships built after them, the Cambridge of 1815, was equally successful; she had the same narrow stern but without the curious galleries."
5. Nargen: an island north-west of Tallinn, Estonia.
6. HMS 'Biter': A 3-gun screw gunboat: URL:- <http://www.pdavis.nl/ShowShip.php?id=1127>.
7. Widcombe or Lyncombe-with-Widcombe : a parish in the hundred of Bath Forum, county of Somerset, 1 mile S.E. of Bath. It is situated on the river Avon and is intersected by the Kennet and Avon canal.
8. In the Royal Marines Museum Special Publication 30 "*Irreproachable Character: The Award of the Royal Marines Meritorious Service Medal*", it states that Col/Sgt James Gray was awarded a George V Admiral Bust MSM on 1st January, 1925. He was also the holder of a Baltic medal and died on the 7th August, 1939. On page 62 is a full page devoted to James Gray, with a picture taken with the Commandant of Portsmouth Division.